

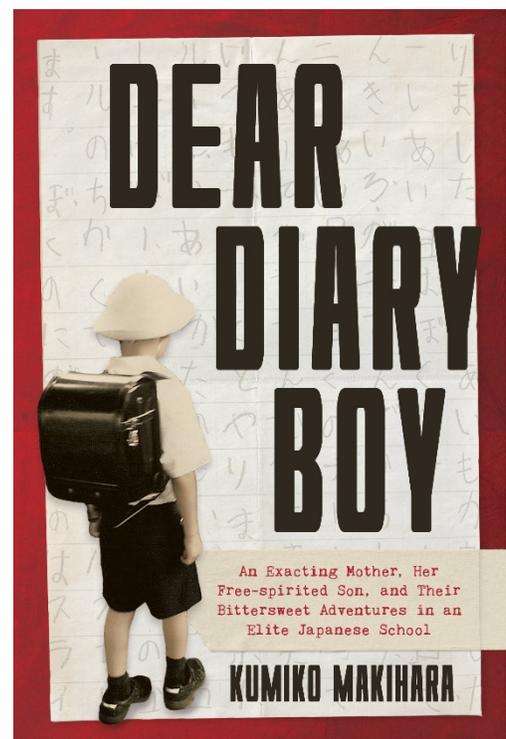
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A single mother chronicles her unconventional son's intense primary years in a Tokyo private school.

DEAR DIARY BOY

**An Exacting Mother,
Her Free-Spirited Son,
and Their Bittersweet
Adventures in an Elite
Japanese School**



by Kumiko Makihara

When her five-year-old son passed the rigorous entrance exams to one of Japan's top private elementary schools, Kumiko Makihara, a single mother, thought they were on their way. Taro would wear the historic dark blue uniform and learn alongside other little Einsteins while she basked in the glory of his high achievements with the other perfect moms. Together they would climb the rungs into the country's successful elite. But it didn't turn out that way. Taro had other things in mind.

While set in Japan, their struggles in the school's hyper-competitive environment mirror those faced by parents here in the United States and raise the same questions about the best way to educate a child—especially one that doesn't quite fit the mold. Public or private? Competitive or nurturing? Standardized or individualized? Helicopter parenting or free-range? Amid this frenzied debate, how does one find balance and maintain a healthy parent-child relationship?

***DEAR DIARY BOY** *An Exacting Mother, Her Free-Spirited Son, and Their Bittersweet Adventures in an Elite Japanese School* is an intensely personal, heartwarming and heartbreaking chronicle of one mother and child's experience in a prestigious private Tokyo school. It's a tale that will resonate with all parents as we try to answer the age-old questions of how best to educate our children and what, truly, is in their best interests versus what is in our own.*



About the Author

Kumiko Makihara writes about her impressions of life in Japan and the United States, two countries she has been traveling back and forth between for most of her life. Her columns have appeared in the *International Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek*, as well as in the books *Reimagining Japan: The Quest for a Future That Works* and *Tsunami: Japan's Post Fukushima Future*. She previously was a reporter for *Time Magazine* and the *Associated Press* and a features editor at the *Moscow Times*.

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Q&A with Kumiko Makihara, author of *DEAR DIARY BOY*

Where does the book's title come from?

Taro's elementary school required the children to keep a diary. In order to encourage him to write entries, his grandmother created a cartoon character called Diary Boy who was always hungry for entries. She would sneak pictures of Diary Boy under his pillow and send him postcards with drawings of Diary Boy on them. One illustration, for example, shows Diary Boy sitting happily at a table with knife and fork in front of a bowl that says "diary" on it that is full of "words."

When did you decide to chronicle your experiences of Taro's schooling?

When I decided to have Taro take the entrance examinations to enter a private elementary school in Tokyo, I found the content of the exams and the preparatory studying so bizarre that I wrote an article about the process for *The New York Times Magazine*. I continued to discover things about Japanese elementary schools that I felt might be unique to Japan and wrote pieces throughout his elementary school years.

How do Japanese private schools differ from American private schools?

What I observed at Taro's school was that the teachers wanted not just to educate my son in academic subjects, but to shape his character as a whole. They strived to create a thoughtful, responsible and independent child. To that end, the school expected the parents to be part of the education process, sharing the same values as the school and following up on school requirements at home.

You describe several unusual entrance exams for The School. In your opinion, which one of them was the most bizarre?

At one "cram school" that prepared children for tests, we were handed a list of things to master. The list included walking on a balance beam while holding a ball in a ladle.

Briefly describe a typical day for Taro while he was enrolled at The School?

Wake up at 6:15 and head out around 7 to walk and then catch a bus to school. Finish school between 3 and 4:30 and then have an after-school class such as swimming, piano or extra studying. Return home between 6 and 7 and do homework, eat dinner, have a bath and get to bed around 10 or 11.

Over the six year period of Taro's primary education, you and Taro often grappled with the numerous regulations The School imposed. Overall, which was the most difficult?

Keeping track of all the required items to bring to school and the various homework assignments was very difficult. I had a long, low table, like a coffee table, in our hallway covered with different piles of books, gym clothes, stationary items, a recorder and so on from which we would select each day's inventory.

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The School encouraged students to develop independence, from their long solo commutes to and from school to handling bullies amongst themselves. Did you agree with this outlook or did your opinion on it change over time?

I agreed with their goals of instilling independence, and I appreciated the leeway they gave the children. Taro is an only child who grew up without a sibling to fight with. I hoped that through various interactions with his classmates, both friendly and hostile, he would learn how to resolve conflicts.

Intense struggles between you and Taro for him to complete homework and keep up with the rigorous academic program were a nightly occurrence. But he liked The School and wanted to continue there with his friends. Do you regret keeping him enrolled?

This is difficult to say since I don't know how an alternative would have turned out. Perhaps he would have been happier at a less demanding school. What I do regret is how angry I was when I was trying to get him to do his homework and how much I belittled him during the process.

You describe the phenomenon of "monster parents" in Japan. How does that differ from the popular term "tiger mother"?

Tiger Mothers are mothers who push their children to an extreme in order for them to excel. Monster Parents are parents who make unreasonable demands on other individuals like teachers for what they desire for their children. Monster parents are not necessarily demanding of their own children.

In Dear Diary Boy you write, "I fantasized about Taro rising up above his classmates in every subject. I felt such accomplishments would reflect my strengths as a mother." Do you consider yourself a "monster parent" or "tiger mother"?

I hope neither! I fantasized that Taro would just excel on his own.

During his schooling Taro frustrates a tutor and teacher to the point of them becoming violent with him. Is this more common in Japan than it is in the U.S.?

Corporal punishment is illegal in Japan. But I do sense that the law may not be observed as strictly in Japan because it is not a litigious society so teachers may feel they can get away with corporal punishment although it is against the law.

Do you feel there are positive elements of the Japanese educational system that U.S. schools could implement?

The Japanese elementary schools treat the children in an egalitarian manner. There are no gifted tracks. All students are deemed teachable, and there is a feeling that everyone learns together at the same pace. Children are often instructed to work in pairs or small groups which encourages them to brainstorm and help each other. I like that philosophy for younger children.

Looking back, would you do anything differently with Taro's schooling?

I would have researched more schools to find a school that would have been a good fit for him, private or public. I would have praised his positive aspects and achievements rather than scold him for his shortcomings and failures.

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